

For some Jews, Christmas Eve is a night of romance

► **CHRISTMAS EVE,**
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Christmas party and work. John was in the coat room, Patrick was with me walking the floor, and Michael was behind the bar."

The Matzo Ball quickly spread to other cities, and spawned more dances, concerts, and comedy shows for Jewish singles. With a little help from the burgeoning Jewish hipster movement, Christmas Eve parties have taken off. This year in Boston, Jewish singles will be making the scene at the Matzo Ball, two parties staged by an organization called JConnection (one at the Hard Rock Cafe for those in their 20s and 30s, and another in Waltham for singles 40 and up). There's even a speed-dating party for gay and lesbian Jews.

Next year, these events will face increased competition when a New York-based group called Let My People Go brings its Christmas Eve ball to Boston. Jeff Strank, the founder of Let My People Go, claims attendance at his New York ball is bigger than the Matzo Ball. Let My People Go holds parties at several venues in Manhattan, and offers complimentary Hummer limousine service so attendees can hop from party to party in VIP style.

"It has become a phenomenon," says Strank. "Some years there are as many as 15 events for Jewish singles happening in New York on Christmas Eve. And there are big parties in Los Angeles, Miami, and Chicago. It's really the one night that you have more Jewish people out looking for romance than any other night of the year."

The answer to the question "Why, on this night, do we look for romance?" is as varied as the people who are throwing and attending these mixers. Sarah Maxwell, associate publisher of New York-based Heeb magazine, says the equation of open bars and "hot Heebs" will inevitably result in multiple love connections.

"None of us have to worry about hangovers the next day, because we don't have to face a big



Clockwise from top left: Allyson Abrams of Brookline and Harris Grandberg of Waltham get in the holiday spirit, Lauren Klatsky of West Roxbury chats with Aaron Block of Somerville, and Rabbi Mayshe Schwartz and his wife, Shifra, enjoy the Koshers Casino in Boston on Monday. The rabbi says large singles events are a logical evolution for young Jews at Christmas.



PHOTOS BY JOHN BOHN/GLOBE STAFF

family dinner on Christmas day," she says. "We can just sleep in late and go to the movies the next day. If you have loads of young, single Jews in a room, it's inevitably going to result in romance, or at least a few fun, drunken hookups."

Mayshe Schwartz, a Brookline-based Orthodox rabbi who wears a baseball cap embroidered with Hebrew symbol chai (which means living) and answers to the nickname Schwartz, thinks the advent of Christmas Eve as Jewish Valentine's Day has more to do with loneliness than the consumption of large quantities of booze.

"At some point, many Jews feel isolated at Christmas," he says. "There's a whole country celebrating something, and you can only run with it so far, then at some point, you can't. You don't have a Christmas tree, stores are closed, everything you're watching is 'Mir-

acle on 34th Street.' It was only logical that these giant singles parties would evolve from this."

Schwartz, who runs the Chabad Chai Center in Brookline, regularly hosts parties and looks for ways to make religion accessible to singles and families who are not members of a temple. This time of year, he says the talk among the single members of his organiza-

tion veers toward the big Christmas Eve parties. That was certainly the case among the singles who attended Chabad Chai's Koshers Casino party in the Theater District on Monday night.

"This will be my first one," says Debi Milkes, a 25-year-old teacher, of Sunday night's Matzo Ball. "I guess I'm hoping to meet someone. I've heard that the people

who show up are usually a little more serious about dating."

Not everyone is a fan of big mixers such as the Matzo Ball. Rob Tannenbaum, music editor at Blender and half of the musical comedy act Good for the Jews, confesses that he's never been to the Matzo Ball, but quickly adds that "all the wild horses in Manhattan couldn't drag me there." He

Party guide

SATURDAY

JBall at the DoubleTree Hotel (40-plus), Waltham. \$49. tjcboston.com

SUNDAY

Matzo Ball at Avalon, Boston. \$25. matzoball.org

JBall at the Hard Rock Cafe (20s and 30s), Boston. \$15. tjcboston.com

Quick Dates: A night of GLBT speed dating, Brookline. \$36. boston-keshet.org

has, however, spent time on the Jewish online dating site JDate.com (and written a song about it), and imagines that the scene at the Matzo Ball is the offline counterpart to that.

"The idea of getting everyone on JDate piled together in a room, drunk on \$13 cosmopolitans, with 20-year-old Madonna songs blasting at 120 decibels, isn't really my idea of a fun night," Tannenbaum says. "I can understand the impulse. Being a Jew on Christmas Eve is really kind of horrible."

Tannenbaum, whose band played in Boston last week, is part of a generation of younger Jews who are looking to create new traditions.

"Most Jewish traditions involve fasting, and that's no fun," says the cheeky Tannenbaum. "The new traditions involve some element of music, comedy, and sometimes even alcohol."

Molly Harris's Christmas Eve tradition involves going to the JConnection's annual party. The 29-year-old dental hygienist has gone on dates with men whom she has met at the party, but unlike Tannenbaum, she takes a less cynical approach to looking for love on Christmas Eve.

"I'm basically there to hang out with my friends and have a good time," she says. "If you take it too seriously, it's going to be stressful. I see Christmas Eve as a bonus holiday. It's like the rest of the world is off doing their own thing, so we get this night to party, and who doesn't love that?"

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